



Pruning for growth

On the essences of learning and development

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Summary

This booklet contains three contributions: a manifesto on the ecology of learning, an introduction to the topic of professional identity and an invitation to join our efforts in thinking, working and investigating in the form of Research-Practice Partnerships. Although the three parts can be read independently of each other, together, they form a natural progression.

Preface

In fruit cultivation, it is simply a way of life. Each year, trees are pruned to ensure light and space for blossoms and fruit. Branches that are obstructing light are cut away, and the side shoots are removed from the 'fruit buds' (tip bearers that form over time), because we know that the blossoms and young apples emerge and develop on them. The tree blossoms and produces fruit from 'old wood'. New branches and fruit buds can form as well, however, and we will sometimes saw away an entire old tip bearer.

Throughout our professional lives, we acquire a great deal of experience and knowledge, which can be seen as fruit buds on which we develop. In contrast to the 'cultivation measures' taken for fruit trees, however, we professionals often feel absolutely no urge to clear away excess growth. On the contrary, it all continues to grow, and everything is important. New experiences and knowledge accumulate and become connected, forming a maze of new paths in our minds. But, do we allow for sufficient light and air? Do we allow our buds enough space, light and air, and do we remove excess 'wood'? Manon Ruijters, a professor of applied science at Stoas Wageningen, re-evaluates these principles in her study on professional identity. Another position, a new job? Go back to the basics, to the fruit buds that you have formed throughout your professional life, cut away the side shoots and make room to develop your new professional identity on your tip bearers. Prune for growth!

Madelon de Beus

Introduction

Balancing mystery and mastery means living somewhere between the hopelessness of the belief that we are unable to understand anything and, at the other extreme, the naivety of the belief that we can know everything. Human beings in this way know of and learn within the unknowable.

(Robert Louis Flood 1999, p. 83)

The dynamics of knowing and not knowing reside at the heart of learning and development. We know that we cannot know everything, yet we continue to be disappointed when there is something that we do not know. How familiar. An entire world remains to be won in the area of understanding learning. It was with this quotation that I opened my inaugural address *Coming into bloom* four years ago. Today, four years later, I should like to repeat it. If there is one thing that I believe we too often forget, it is the fact that the importance of not knowing is equal to that of knowing. This is precisely the reason that research is such a fine activity. It provides both: knowing and not knowing, answers and an endless stream of new questions.

That having been said, I shall now engage in managing several expectations: this booklet reflects knowing and not knowing with regard to the themes of the chair in the past four years, which have brought us several steps farther, but which have left many questions open. I do not address this in any greater detail, nor do I discuss the title further. Throughout my ‘coming into bloom’, I have been quite content simply to provide stimulation, leaving the ultimate meaning and associations to the reader.

What I should now like to address concerns the origins of this booklet. Its existence has been a subject of considerable uncertainty in the past year. This was largely due to the appearance and nature of other products, particularly the book on professional identity in organisations (*Je binnenste buiten* [Bringing your inside out]). What else is there to say? In the end, we (Madelon de Beus and myself) decided to create this publication anyway. This was for three primary reasons. First, we consider it important to complete the ecology of learning with a brief manifesto. Second, we would like to provide an accessible introduction to the topic of professional identity, particularly for those who might not yet be ready for an entire book on the subject. Third, we would like to invite you to join our efforts in thinking, working and investigating in the form of Research-Practice Partnerships.

This booklet thus contains three contributions: a manifesto, an introduction and an invitation. Although the three parts can be read independently of each other, together, they form a natural progression. They run from the beginning four years ago to some place in the future, at least a few years from now.

Now that all of the insights, feedback, texts, contributions and corrections have been gathered, I would like to offer a word of gratitude. So many people have made contributions during the four-year chair period – too many to mention by name. Consistent with the context of this booklet, I shall cut the list back to three groups, expressing my gratitude to several individuals by name, who represent all others in their respective areas.

First, I am grateful to my colleagues from Stoas Wageningen | Vilentum University of Applied Sciences and Twynstra Gudde, who have always made me feel as if I have ‘a home’, not so much because of the physical location (I realise that I am more often not there than I am there), but because of the connection that we have when we do see each other. Who better to thank from this group than Madelon de Beus and Marcel de Rooij, who are not only examples in this regard, but who have made this all possible.

Next, I would like to thank everyone who has been involved in the research of the past years – by introducing questions; by posing puzzles to me in emails, conversations and master classes; by participating as researchers (in the Professional Identity research group and knowledge network) or as part of the actual research. As representatives of this group, I would particularly like to mention Truda Kruijer, Freerk Wortelboer, Tanja ten Bergen and Freek van der Laan for their curiosity, their trust and their unwavering openness to exploring new terrains together.

Finally, the critical and supportive reflections concerning the search for new research directions for the coming years have been particularly helpful to me. In addition to those I have already mentioned by name, Robert-Jan Simons, Matthieu Weggeman, Peter van Lieshout, Britta Gielen, Aleida Meijerink and Joost Voerman have been a part of this enterprise. Thank you for the inspiration.

One person deserves a special place, although he would fit into any category. Without him, this booklet would not have been possible, if only because I would never have gotten around to writing it for trying to find my glasses, keys, telephone and what have you. Thank you Björn, not only for your love, but for holding everything together.

In writing, I am reminded of the words of John F. Kennedy: ‘As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them’.

Manon Ruijters
Laren, March 2015

Part 1: Manifesto

The ecological perspective on learning

*Understanding ecological interdependence means understanding relationships.
It requires the shifts of perception that are characteristic of systems thinking—
from the parts to the whole,
from objects to relationships,
from contents to patterns.
...Nourishing the community means nourishing those relationships.
(Fritjof Capra, 1996, Epilogue: Ecological Literacy)*

With this statement, Capra summarises the core of an ecological perspective on ‘living’ and, in my opinion, an ecological perspective on *learning*. It is becoming increasingly clear that learning and development are infinite. The careful organisation of these processes is not enough to take on the avalanche of ‘musts’ under which professionals and organisations are often buried. It is becoming increasingly common for us to go beyond our limits in the attempt to get ahead or keep up with the rest. It is not particularly surprising that questions concerning the sustainable, wise and meaningful organisation of learning and development are multiplying before our very eyes. A different perspective is needed. In addition to helping us view the world in a different way, an ecological lens can help us to consider learning and organisational development from a new angle.

With his statement, Capra also summarises in a single breath what I expressed more than four years ago in an initial exploration, as part of my inaugural address, *In Bloei Trekken* (Coming into Bloom) (Ruijters, 2011), on the Ecology of Learning. After four years, it is time to take stock. I would like to do so by summarising the ecological perspective in a brief manifesto. This contribution thus does present any complete or historical overviews of what we have investigated and undertaken within the chair. Reports and articles to this end are available, and those who have been involved would be happy to engage in dialogue. What I would like to do is to capture the ecological perspective on learning in a brief document that inspires and challenges, instead of describing and explaining.

In my recent experience, something fundamental has changed for me. After years of arguing that the “Language of Learning” (Kluwer, 2006) does not constitute a vision on learning, after arguing that I would prefer to arrange and create language that can help people to formulate their own visions, after starting with ‘merely’ a title, a framework and compass for research, I have now found my own vision on learning. It is a vision inspired by ecology.

Note to the reader. The concept of ‘perspective’ seems to flow easily from the pen, but what does it actually mean? Louise Fresco provides a striking definition: ‘Perspective is the capacity to create distance in order to maintain an overview. We use it to zoom in on the details and then to zoom out to the larger picture, thus alternating our focus, lest we digress into the perspective of either the frog or the hawk. Distance, reflection and critical capacity are essential to coping with societal dilemmas and with the temptations of power.’

Perspective teaches us to think comparatively, to analyse differences and similarities, to understand (...) heterogeneity. (...) Perspective is knowing our place in the broader network of things' (Fresco, 2014, p. 31).

In my opinion, its value goes beyond my own professional practice, and it can provide direction to others with regard to the careful handling and design of learning and development for professionals and organisations.

In this manifesto, I attempt to formulate the core of this vision and no more, thus sufficient space for others to find their way within it. In doing so, I focus on the example of professional identity, in order to make it somewhat more concrete. Moreover, our ways of thinking about and working on professional identity (as well as the collective variant, working with professional frames) have emerged from this manner of thinking. I use the same principles for other issues relating to learning and development of various characters and in various contexts.

Core

Learning and development are core processes within our lives. For a large part, these processes take place by nature (without too much consideration on our part). They provide us with the quality necessary for taking on new challenges; they help us to cope with situations in which we do not know what to do, in addition to helping us get to know and recognise ourselves better and to reach our full potential.

Because learning and development are so closely intertwined with our human condition, the distortion of such learning (e.g. when we exert pressure on it, expect too much or take it out of context) can also have far-reaching consequences on our well-being: it can exhaust us, cause us to lose our connection with ourselves, decrease our self-confidence or make us dig in our heels.

An important question is thus, 'What is this distortion?' An example of such distortion could be the urge to organise informative learning with the goal of answering transformative questions or overdosing on 'formal' learning when informal learning should be a necessary component. In our efforts to organise matters, we have a tendency to break knowledge, skills, competences, insights and the like into pieces, which we then transfer in a structured manner, trusting that those undergoing the process will systematically develop into more skilful individuals as a result. This type of distortion has become so entrenched that we are hardly aware that we are doing so. Fortunately, we are increasingly realising (or feeling) the limitations of the prevailing approach, and we are searching for ways of escaping it. Nevertheless, such escaping is not always beneficial at first.

One example of an attempt to escape can be seen in the call of many professional colleagues to devote more attention to informal learning, using the 70-20-10 rule (70% learned through practice/informally – 20% 'from others' and 10% formal) (Jennings, 2014). With this popular rule, we opt for 'technical' solutions that do embrace the importance of the context, although they lose sight of the long-term perspective. To be clear, I do not dispute the importance of informal learning or the fact that people report that they can attribute only 10% of their learning to educational programmes. It is nevertheless important for people to be involved

in the organisation of learning, looking not only behind the old problem, but also behind the new solution. The fact that only 10% of what is learned can be traced to formal learning does not automatically lead to the conclusion that formal learning can be restricted to 10% (of what? Of the former range of offerings? Of all learning?). It is quite conceivable that formal learning has laid the foundation underlying all of the informal learning. What can we still see, if we do not know where to look?

The desire for drastically curtailing formal learning, which resounds loudly and clearly from practice, misses the point. With regard to connections between learning and working, the task is not to restrict formal learning to 10%–20%, but to add 80% informally. At this point, I must note that the connection of working and learning should never be a goal unto itself.

The overdose of formal learning is only one manifestation of our tendency to distort learning. In broad terms, the distortion can be best characterised by fragmentation, separation and malleability. Let us now examine each of these three aspects.

Exploration

Fragmentation

To organise learning, we divide knowledge, skills, competences and other elements into pieces. When a question arises, we work according to the piece that fits best, or we search for several other pieces to fit together. We puree the tomatoes before we decide what we wish to cook, forgetting that we can no longer make a salad from the pureed tomatoes, should we wish to do so. Examples abound. For example, last year, a customer wanted to map a particular development. A large number of discussions were held with a good representation of the players in the organisation with regard to the current and desired situations. Both situations (current and desired) were analysed according to competences. The result: the previous and new situations called for the same set of competences. Does this mean that no actual change had taken place? Does it mean that the change was not fundamental? No; it actually means that the change took place between the competences. The change was actually located in the professional frame (this concept is addressed in greater detail in Part 2), with regard to the positioning of individuals within the profession. The same competences are needed, but they are deployed in fundamentally different ways. Competence profiles do not capture the frame. This is also why they can give such a soulless impression. It is not because they are incorrect, but because they zoom in too far, thus telling only a part of the story.

Separation

Another habit that we have developed is segmentation. The more complex and dynamic a desired development is, the more energy we will invest in simplifying and managing the processes that are to be organised. Greater organisational developments provide a good example. The first thing that we do is to divide the destination into projects and the entire staff into ‘target groups’. For each project, we then determine who needs what, using this information to compile our solutions. This can easily lead to an overdose of separate interventions (due to the combined sum of all projects), followed by change fatigue. Somewhere, very far away, staff members and leaders still ‘know’ the message that the organisation sent to explain this hail of buckshot, but they no longer feel its coherence

and value. They are even less likely to be able to determine their own direction and route within the development.

Malleability

A third characteristic is malleability, which can colour the design of learning. Every organisation has its own desires: capacity for innovation, result orientation, flexibility. It is interesting to note, however, how seldom we ask why an organisation, team or individual actually has little capacity for innovation or orientation towards results. We are much more likely to assume a direct association with fundamental qualities or with self-selected characteristics of the system. We simply overlook this connection. For example, consider the desire for innovation capacity on the part of account managers working in an organisation that assigns highest priority to the clear, transparent delivery of services to a large audience. Alternatively, consider the desire for greater personal responsibility and self-direction on the part of employees ('We would like to place responsibility lower in the organisation and allow greater freedom, but they just do not accept it'), in which we conveniently forget the years of direction and our own lack of confidence in the quality or abilities of the employees. Although these desires are not peculiar or necessarily impossible, they should clearly not be taken for granted, and they can be harmful in some cases.

Shifts in perspective

If we continue to work within this perspective (of fragmentation, separation and malleability), all of the energy invested in promoting the field of learning and development will, at best, amount to a form of sub-optimisation. If we are to take any substantial steps at all, we must take a fundamentally different view of our field.

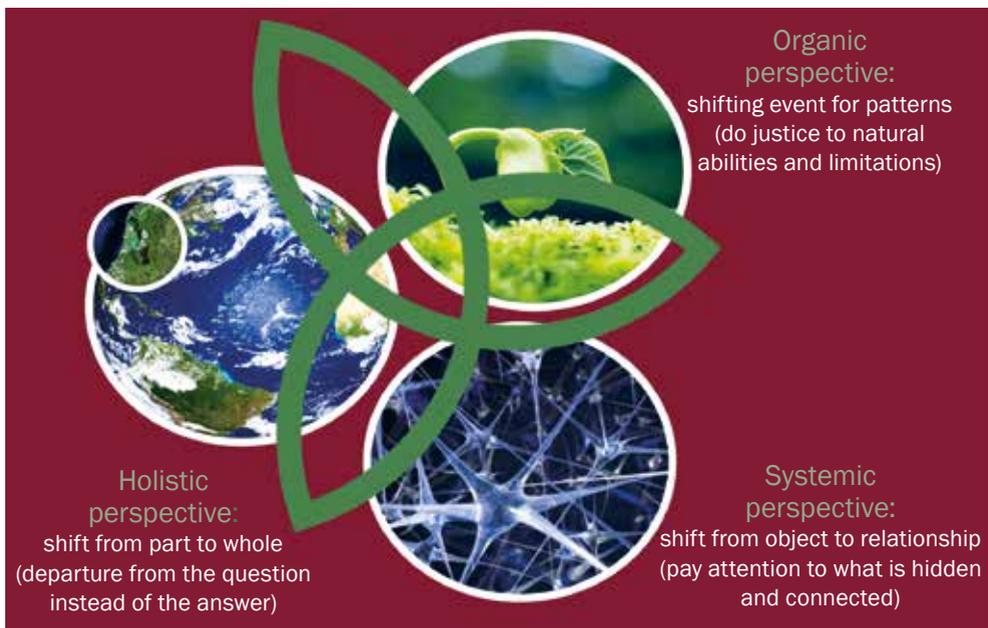


Fig. 1. Summary of the ecological perspective on learning

The ecological perspective on learning is one such fundamentally different view. It challenges us to comprehend the complexity of learning and development, to see connections and to avoid losing sight of 'nature'. When filling in the specific details of the ecological perspective, it is helpful to regard our field from other angles. As an illustration, I provide brief statements of how this has influenced our professional identity.

The holistic perspective:

Thinking from within the question rather than from in the answer

Instead of merely zooming in and fragmenting, the challenge in answering questions related to learning and development has to do with continuously zooming out and giving proper consideration to the entire system addressed by learning in the issue at hand. The system can be an individual, with all of his or her own peculiarities, or it can be an organisation in relation to its stakeholders or even an issue in all of its complexity.

Professional identity: Professional identity (PI) is a good example with which to illustrate the holistic perspective. If it becomes apparent that attention to professional identity is lacking within an organisation, the notion of organising a 'learning activity' in this regard can be tempting. Professional identity, however, is not a competence or substantive element that can be added to a training guide with a few focused interventions. Professional identity is the heart of professional development, both for individuals and for the collective of professionals. Professional identity refers to the manner in which professionals wish to be positioned within their fields and to the manner in which a group of professionals view their field. Issues in this regard are bound to arise in any organisation. An organisation wishing to cope with professional identity should allow time and space to explore the areas in which it plays a role (e.g. the dilemmas in the field, the nature of the professional, the collectivity of the services provided), the pressure to which professional identity is exposed (transformations desired in the field) and the preferences underlying them (e.g. excellence, self-direction, well-being, resilience), in order to work from within the issue as a whole. Professional identity is the heart of this process – a heart that is often forgotten. This heart cannot simply be taken out of the system for a time in order to provide a boost.

The systemic perspective:

Shifting attention from object to relationship

The popular concept of 'complexity' is quite relevant to thinking on learning and development. It therefore deserves some explanation, lest it become a cliché. In this context, we once again turn to Louise Fresco, reading from her book *Kruisbestuiving (Cross-pollination)*: 'Complexity is not simply the next in a series of stop-gap measures for any random problem, an excuse that absolves us from understanding something. Complexity is a substantial feature of reality that always colours our relationship to reality. Complexity means that we are unable to derive the characteristics of the whole from its parts (...) [it] can lead to unpredictable situations and,

conversely, allows us to make general statements concerning large numbers of cases, even with regard to people and their behaviour. Complexity is never an excuse, but it is always an intellectual challenge (Fresco, 2014, p. 29-30).

In addition to zooming out, the challenge involves devoting attention to the connections within the system, rather than thinking in terms of target groups, functional groups and participants. Learning and development are not located exclusively in people, but between them as well (perhaps even more so). In addition to existing between people, relationships also occur within and between interventions, as is the case with the association between form and time (e.g. duration, regularity, rhythm, turn-around time, history), space (e.g. physical, mental), nature (e.g. the character of people, organisations, issues) and inspiration (e.g. inspiration, energy, motivation, drivers, muses).

Professional identity: An individual's professional identity is embedded within a social and a personal self at the group, organisational and societal levels. Working with professional identity is a social activity. In addition to peace and distance, it requires connection and interaction. That which individuals reveal of themselves is determined largely by the contexts in which they find themselves at a given time, as well as by their relationships to these contexts. Depending upon mutual recognition and acknowledgement, they may be capable of either realising their full potential or exerting only partial effort. Professional identity thus ultimately centres on connections with the customer (e.g. student, client) and, in collaborations between professionals, within the organisation or the professional association.

The organic perspective:

Doing justice to natural patterns

With regard to learning and development in and around organisations, we actually are aware that we often expect too much, too fast, and that we sometimes even want the wrong things. In general, we 'forget' to consider patterns that are actually quite obvious, as with falling leaves, pruning branches to encourage new growth or simply the realisation that not all plants grow at the same pace and in the same manner. The challenge is thus to seek harmony between that which is possible by nature (natural qualities of learning, natural pace and patterns) and the desire and pressure that we encounter in organisations. "Embracing the order of nature also involves accepting that chaos is the order of nature" (according to H. Adams, reprint 1970).

Professional identity: Working with professional identity also provides a good illustration of this principle. Professional identity is not something that you can work to achieve at a given point, after which no further effort is needed. Professional identity requires maintenance, pruning and fertilisation. Professional identity regularly calls for attention, sometimes at greater depth due to major changes in the field or in the organisation, and at other times in lighter forms, in order to ensure that we do not forget ourselves in all of our enthusiasm or bravado. Above all, professional identity calls for an organic approach.

In conclusion

The description provided here brings us close to the ecological perspective, although it is important to note that these three perspectives cannot be separated as neatly as they are in this description. The perspectives intervene with each other, and they are inextricably bound to each other. It is for this reason that Capra begins with the following determination:

'Understanding ecological interdependence means understanding relationships' (Capra, 1997, p. 290). The holistic, systemic and organic perspectives overlap each other, even with regard to such shared topics as diversity, unpredictability and self-organisation. It would be neither possible nor desirable to disentangle them completely. Does this imply that everything should continue to become larger and more abstract? No, certainly not. When we look at an issue holistically, systemically and organically, the solution is more likely to be simple, short and for a small group than it is to involve a boxcar full of activities. Nature often achieves success with a light rain shower in a single place.

The crucial objective of this ecological perspective is to contribute to a sustainable organisation of learning and development, in a manner that unites sense and being, creates space, prevents fatigue and helps to develop wisdom.

Professional identity is more than a fortunate example with which to illustrate the various aspects. Professional identity also forms the heart of the ecological way of looking at learning and development in organisations. It was thus the inspiration for the research that we have conducted on this perspective in the past four years. The results and insights are

described in *Je binnenste buiten. Over professionele identiteit in organisaties* (Bringing your inside out: On professional identity in organisations)(Ruijters, 2015). We introduce this topic in Part 2.

Part 2: Introduction

Professional identity in a nutshell

Introduction

Around July 2012, during the election campaigns in the United States, an interview with the actress Sigourney Weaver was broadcast on television. The animated conversation was about politics and the American elections. At one point, the journalist asked, ‘Wouldn’t you have made a good politician?’ Her reaction was quick and flippant, along the order of, ‘No, not really. A politician is expected to have a certain stability, coherence and consistency of thought and ideas. I’ve been too playful for that. I like humour – the light-heartedness with which actors are allowed to change their minds for no reason’.

This provides a fine image of the interaction between who you are and your professional identity. Weaver draws a charming link between her identity and her profession: ‘we’ actors are allowed to view the world in this way. Politicians cannot do that; they must abide by other rules and norms, and they therefore need other knowledge and skills. The underlying message is that the profession that you choose should suit you.

Our relative inclination to light-heartedness or to thorough and consistent argumentation is so fundamental to who we are that we do not have to give much thought to it, as demonstrated in Weaver’s spontaneous reaction. In this respect, our identity provides us with an anchor. Know who you are, and direct your choice. Choices, both great and small, feel more solid when they are anchored in and consistent with our identity. We can thus see identity as the entirety of traits and characteristics, social relationships, roles and group memberships that defines who we are (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). Our identity constitutes our compass; it is that which gives us meaning. It can bring certain matters to our attention or allow them to fade into the background.

Let us briefly return to Sigourney Weaver. With her reaction, she simultaneously highlights another aspect of the story. In addition to demonstrating a direct, individual choice, she establishes a link to the social spectrum: her profession. This collective helps her to develop frameworks with which to view reality. Such frames comprise the profession’s manner of thinking and acting (Shaffer, 2006). A frame provides a structure for the development of one’s professional identity, but it does not limit it.

Like identity, these frames are largely implicit, although their influence is quite strong. We can recognise this in situations requiring us to shift to a new frame (e.g. during a transformation at work). We have worked in a particular way up to this point, and now it must ‘change’. Examples could include a teacher whose role must change from that of an expert to that of a process supervisor or a public health nurse who is expected to shift from ‘caring for’ to ‘ensuring that’. Theories about how things work in practice (also known as cognitive schemes) must be overturned; interpretations must be expanded or released. The process of shifting from one frame to another generates a great deal of tension (Illeris, 2007; J. Mezirow, 2009; Nieuwenhuis, 2013).

This text was also published in Je binnenste buiten. Over professionele identiteit in organisaties (Bringing your inside out: On professional identity in organisations; Ruijters, 2015).



Fig. 2. Interaction between individual and context

Professional identity emerges in the interaction between individuals and their contexts. Professional identity thus involves our relationships with ourselves and our relationships to others. It connects these two relationships. It is what gives a particular professional a unique and indelible colour. A strong professional identity is accompanied by resilience, and it provides a foundation for self-direction.

Our professional identities allow us to cope with changes and developments without losing ourselves. Professional identity also provides order – arising from a clear distinction between who we are, our colours and the characteristics of others – thus being of benefit to both. Finally, professional identity lies at the base of excellence. It is the source of the passion and eagerness to learn that allows us to achieve our full potential, both personally and in the practice of our professions.

In this section, we visit several stories from practice in order to sketch how personal or collective issues can either create a role for or jeopardise professional identity.

We do this according to three categories:

- fundamental changes within a domain;
- issues relating to career;
- issues relating to cooperation and innovation.

Fundamental changes within a domain

From expert to consultant

An organisation submitted a request for advice to its group of ‘business intelligence experts’. The question was whether someone might be able to help them develop into ‘business intelligence consultants’. The solution that was ultimately selected consisted of a programme lasting about six days, during which the knowledge and skills that the experts would need with regard to consultancy were presented to them in an attractive manner.

It is hard to imagine that this did not raise any red flags for the customer, the advisor or the other parties involved. Surely someone must have thought, ‘Something’s not right here’. Upon closer examination, we can see that it is highly unlikely that the change desired in this situation could be achieved through the addition of knowledge and skills.

The change desired by the organisation has the character of a transformation: it involves a fundamental change in the profession – another presence within the field. Whereas the frame that these experts had maintained up to that point had implied that they should identify the best possible solutions, they were now being expected to look for the most suitable solution. A customer was involved. Interests would play a role. The experts would no longer have the exclusive right to determine what is good according to substance. The customer would have a great deal of input (Hofer, 2006).

For experts who take pride in their substantive work, this change would involve more than simply the acquisition of new skills. For a large part, it would involve a change in values, norms and interpretations regarding proper expertise. Together, a group of experts would apply these changes within the existing frame. As individuals, it would also be important to place these changes within their own frames and coordinate them to such aspects as who they are, who they would like to be and what they regard as beneficial.

From florist to teacher

One example that closely approaches to this situation comes from our own university of applied sciences (Stoas Wageningen | Vilentum University of Applied Sciences). This institution has a group of students entering directly from various tracks of secondary education, with an equally large group who initially entered ‘green’ (e.g. agricultural, horticultural, land-based and environmental) fields and later decided to teach in these fields. As stated by Shaffer (2006): the students in the latter group do not merely possess knowledge of the field; they have experience as gardeners, landscape architects, florists, or in equestrian sports or animal husbandry.

They are now adding a new field: becoming instructors. Although their solid backgrounds and practical experience in green occupations are helpful, it is easy to overlook the fact that, on many points, the teacher frame differs considerably from the original frame (e.g. that of florist or gardener). It thus involves learning to work within a new professional frame. It involves both adding to and expanding the professional identity.

Sylvia’s story

Sylvia (years of experience as a florist, now a floristry teacher): ‘For a florist, it is important to be able to do something, to have the proper technique and to carry out all orders with creativity. Good results and satisfied customers are important. Customers appreciate your passion for the profession and your ability to create things. Now that I’m a teacher, it’s more about bringing other people to a point at which they can create something. I have to be clear in my story and my instruction, I have to be able to persuade and inspire. The fact that you are good in your field does not necessarily mean that others will be able to create a nice flower arrangement with no trouble. This requires learning a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Another highly important point is that you have to become enthusiastic and independent. As a teacher, your passion and affinity for your students needs to be at least as great as your passion for flowers. You are doing it right if your students catch your enthusiasm and achieve great accomplishments that exceed even their own expectations. Your colour is no longer determined by your creations, but by your students’.

From caring for to ensuring that

An industry-wide change that does not concern a new field but an important new perspective on the manner of working can be found within the field of mental healthcare. The manager of a home for people with mental disabilities provides an illustration: 'We have encountered an intriguing development in the past 40 years. Not so long ago, this organisation was operated with a great deal of love and attention from nuns. People who had children with mental disabilities and who could no longer manage to care for them would come to us, and their children would be admitted with the greatest of care. Parents had the utmost confidence that the nuns would provide good care for their children. [This is also a clear reference to a professional frame for nuns; ed.] The nuns have gone. Their tasks have been taken over by professionals. A great deal has changed in the field of mental healthcare. The children's parents have since passed away, and their brothers and sisters are now the contacts for their families. They represent another generation of people who are more broadly aware of what is possible and customary in the world, and who thus ask more questions and hold different expectations. Good is not necessarily good enough anymore. This assigns an entirely different form of responsibility to those working with clients'.

In addition, a prevailing opinion has emerged that 'caring for' is increasingly being replaced by 'ensuring that'. This is only a small part of the enormous changes that have taken place in the field of mental healthcare. What can we expect to accomplish with refresher courses and continuous education? It is important to work with each other to re-determine the profession (frame), while working individually to determine where each of us should stand in relation to the profession.

Career

Initial education

The following question is asked in the certification for consultants in the *Orde van organisatieadviseurs* (Order of Organisational Consultants): How did you become a consultant? It is an intriguing question. Although there are a few professional training programmes for consultants, they require several years of experience in consultancy. The majority of consultants did not become consultants through education. How, then? And when exactly do you become a consultant?

While this state of affairs doubtlessly has its disadvantages, it also has at least one major advantage: becoming a consultant implies a process of searching (at times active, at other times passive) for values and standards within the field. How did I become a consultant? What is actually a good consultant? These questions call for reflection on both the frame of the consultant and the individual consultant's personal attitude towards this frame. The situation is quite different in professions that are entered through initial educational programmes. One would think that the frame of the profession would be instilled from the very beginning. Students are introduced to the profession and working world through authentic professional tasks. They learn the standards and expectations that apply within it. They learn to orient themselves towards these standards and expectations, as well as towards the standards of the study programme. Both are simultaneously a topic of discussion and a source of implicit direction ('hidden curriculum').

For example, in teacher-education programmes, students enter the teaching profession with the notion of becoming teachers, based on their experience of ‘receiving’ education. In the programme, they are given frameworks and assignments while learning to function within an organisation, how their colleagues organise their work and what is considered normal in their work. Considerable energy is also devoted to meeting the expectations of others. In addition to authentic tasks, efforts are invested in the development of a professional identity and the promotion of self-direction (De Bruijn et al., 2005). In addition to knowledge and skills, this process involves professional attitudes and typical perspectives within the profession of choice.

Nevertheless, while people with degrees from universities of applied sciences appear to have mastered their fields and to know the values and standards of these fields, they have not necessarily assigned their own meanings and interpretations to them. In any case, studies conducted in teacher-education programmes have indicated that little attention is paid to helping students become acquainted with themselves (Beijaard, 2009). An analogy can be drawn to the expression ‘being painted blue’, which is used in the police academy. This expression also seems to emphasise the imposition of a collective colour, thus raising questions regarding the state of professional identity. It should nevertheless be clear that, in these professions, it is important to develop an attitude towards the collective – and thus a professional identity.

Initial study programmes at universities have a different purpose. Citing Radboud University: ‘A university education primarily teaches students academic thinking, focusing less on any specific profession. At the university, students learn to take a critical view of various theories and to acquire new knowledge on their own. Learning takes place largely through self-study. This “academic level” ensures that those with university degrees can be deployed in a wide range of contexts’.¹

In many cases, upon starting to work in a profession, those with academic training have yet to learn the frame of the field and to structure their own professional interpretations of it. It would therefore be very helpful if they could be challenged to be actively engaged in working with the frame while structuring their own personal development, to an even greater extent than is the case for students in universities of applied sciences.

Beginning professional

Having completed the degree programme, starting professionals find their first jobs. Everything is new:

- *The environment or the organisation.* This applies to working life (with consequences in the area of work-life balance), as well as to the concrete settings in which people find themselves.
- *The frame of the occupation that people will practice.* Even if knowledge is present, starting professionals still have limited insight into the rules of the game, and their knowledge (or at least a part of it) has yet to be converted into practical theory.
- *Individual professional identity.* Who am I as a professional? In the link to employment, people often temporarily forget their personal qualities, certainties and convictions when finding their own places.

1 Internet: www.ru.nl/ouders/studiekeuze/verschil-hbo-wo (21 October 2014).

If this multi-faceted search is coupled with little guidance – as is the case in the world of consultancy, due to shifting teams, each working according to its own professional standards, or in the world of education, in which teachers often have their own classes and direct collaboration cannot be assumed – the high prevalence of burn-out at young ages should not come as a surprise. It is therefore not without reason that these developments are labelled as crises (Meijer, 2014). This term reflects the struggle that is involved in the development of a new part of one’s identity. The only guidance that starting professionals have is their tasks, in which they have yet to develop any routine. Individual co-workers have their own convictions.

Crisis obviously differ in magnitude. In many cases, crises that cause actual ‘pain’ can bring people closer to what they consider truly important, whether in their work or in life as a whole (Adams, Hayes, & Hopson, 1976; Meijer, 2014).

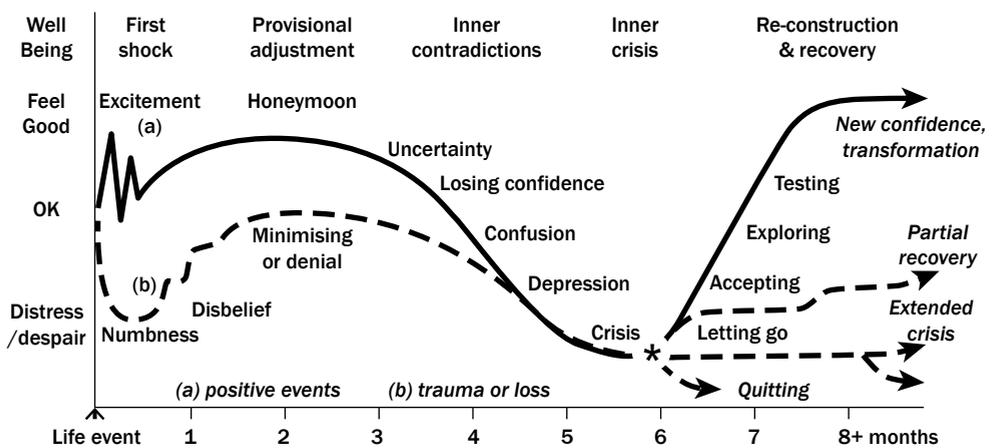


Fig. 3. The ‘transition cycle’ developed by Adams, Hayes and Hopson (1976).

The question that arises at this point is whether order, rhythm, regularity, self-protection, the ability to say ‘no’, and other topics that are addressed largely in self-help books and coaching recommendations can be used as solutions for preventing, recovering from or avoiding burn-out. Guidance ultimately comes through experience, as professionals notice what does and does not work, what they consider important and unimportant, what they can and cannot do and what they are comfortable and uncomfortable with, and as they see how things work.

Ascendant leaders

It is not only at the beginning of a career that developments having a great deal to do with professional identity can occur. They can also occur during the course of a career. Interesting examples can be found with regard to ascendant leaders who started at the bottom of the ladder and who systematically grew into positions on the board of directors. Such moments can occur when a professional enters management because the team of directors wishes to promote people from their own ranks. This case involves people who have transferred from substance to management. It is comparable to the example presented earlier.

Even if we are thinking from the perspective of a single category (e.g. management), we may still conclude that, in addition to their similarities, the various supervisory positions exhibit fundamental differences. Some leaders or managers develop their careers through mergers and reorganisations: from team manager to department manager, from a company with 50 employees to one with 500 and then to one with 5000, and ultimately to director in the supervisory board. Although all of these positions are forms of leadership, they are highly different professions.

How can these steps be supported? How can the changes in frame and professional identity resulting from these steps be supported? Following a one-off course in management development or leadership seems insufficient.

At this point, it is interesting to consider the difference between management development and leadership development. Management development largely concerns the technical aspects of supervision: coping with issues relating to finance, personnel, scheduling and other matters. Leadership tracks focus largely on the person: who you are, where you come from and what provides you with your colour? It is interesting to note that the connection between these two aspects often proves quite difficult. One aspect that the development addresses only to a limited extent is how one's position can be continually re-determined. What is an individual's stance as a team leader and then as a department manager? What does this movement imply, which place does the individual occupy within the system, and what does and does not belong to the individual?

In abstract terms, all of these forms involve management or leadership. With proper consideration, each involves a different professional frame, to which we would do well to adjust our attitudes. Successful interventions for a team manager cannot be translated directly to middle management. The smaller the change is, the more difficult this change is likely to be and the more likely it is to be overlooked. Like skating outside a worn track, this is not easy to do.

Professional identity in daily work

The preceding description can give the impression that professional identity is of interest primarily to the 'major' choice moments in working life. Even outside of these points, however, professional identity plays a role in our regular work. For example, it can play a role at times and in places that are not regulated, in situations that require solutions falling outside the beaten path and at moments when custom solutions are needed. In addition to being an integral part of being professional, the institutionalisation of a large share of the professional community (e.g. in schools, hospitals, consultancy firms) has also magnified the complexity of such moments. In many cases, it involves tensions between what would be the best solution in technical terms and what is pragmatically feasible or between what we might regard as fine work and the opinions of our colleagues (which are not automatically the same).

It thus involves issues for which technology, pragmatism, ethics and aesthetics provide different answers. In this context, consultants are likely to recognise situations in which additional time and attention are needed in order to develop a good design for change, but in which they are constrained to act within the possibilities and boundaries set by the principal or in which the director wishes to take over the reins from the board at any cost, in order to push innovations through 'much more quickly' (but probably largely in line with the director's own interpretations).

In addition to the tension between technology, pragmatism, ethics and aesthetics, professional identity involves issues in which professional freedom is jeopardised, in which the professional is not calling all of the shots but in which interaction is needed. In many cases, however, professional space is interpreted as a personal playing field, a place of ultimate freedom. Consider the following example from the field of education: a decision has been made to provide tutoring to a student with dyslexia. After the first academic period, however, the tutoring had failed to achieve any results. It is obviously not surprising that the student is disappointed and no longer sees any benefit in tutoring. His father approaches the tutor. Together, they reach the following confidential agreement: the son's marks for the following period will be recorded as 'satisfactory', regardless of the actual assessments. The actual marks will be reported on the last report (noting promotion to the following level). The final report is 'truly' satisfactory, and the student is promoted to the next level. The tutor's decision could be seen as an expression of the teacher's professional identity from within his own professional space. The reader is unlikely to have difficulty empathising with the choice that was made. Such empathy might be somewhat more difficult in the next example: a student with autism misses the graduations requirements by one point in one subject. The teacher in question decides to give him a 'mercy 6', based on the argument that this student will probably be placed in a sheltered workshop and never enter the regular labour market. In doing so, however, might the teacher be offering the student a false prospect of meaningful existence? His colleagues support his decision. In both examples, the teacher is faced with a dilemma and makes a choice based on professional identity. In the second case, the decision is also made with the full knowledge of the team. Professional action, even within the context of professional space, is a collective affair. Like professional identity, it is formed in the social field (see also the following section).

Issues relating to cooperation and innovation

As stated before, in addition to changes in a domain or in a career, professional identity can play a role in another category of practical settings: interaction and cooperation. I present the following experience sketch as an introduction. A friend has talked you into accompanying him to a party at which you do not know anyone. After waiting a while for your friend to return from the bar, you realise that this could go on longer than you had thought, thus turning this into a lonely evening. You look around and start listening. In this way, you pick up information about the occupations of the people in the group around you. It is related to your own occupation. This connection gives you a sense of being on solid ground. It opens up a world of associations and questions. In other words, identification can be accelerated if there is recognition: 'Oh, so you're a conductor?' This opens up many topics for conversation (e.g. including trains, tickets, travelling the entire country, hassles with the train service and winter). Identity is a social concept. Your identity is formed in large part by the networks to which you belong. Identity thus has a great deal to do with mirroring, adopting and connecting. It is interesting to see what identity does in cooperation.

Cooperation

Fewer and fewer tasks can be performed by one person. Fewer and fewer issues can be resolved individually. As argued by Kaats and Opheij, 'Only together can we take on the issues and

challenges of these times' (2011). Together, we are also smarter than we are alone, as demonstrated in the concept of collective intelligence (Malone, Laubacher, & Dellarocas, 2010). Learning to cooperate is thus becoming increasingly likely to be included as a competence or subject on the educational agenda. This is also a sign that, in addition to gaining importance, cooperation does not happen on its own and that it raises issues related to learning. One's professional identity does not necessarily facilitate cooperation. It is not a key to success; too many other aspects play a role for this to be the case. Nevertheless, to the extent that the professional identities of the people at the table can be recognised and identified, there is a substantially greater chance of balanced cooperation. This is because everyone in such a group is aware of what is important personally (e.g. points that should and should not be used for compromise, where one stands, which conditions the individual requires). Given that a strong professional identity is at the foundation of consistency in behaviour, others will recognise us as such, expect things from us and ask questions on the topic for which we have answers. Without a strong identity, however, we are more likely to doubt, less likely to know what is important to us and quicker to go on the defensive when confronted with other perspectives and ways of thinking. It makes it somewhat more difficult to be open, to engage in dialogue and to cooperate.

Temporary partnerships

The importance of professional identity increases in temporary partnerships (e.g. project teams, consultancy teams, innovation teams and professional learning communities), which are becoming increasingly common. The questions that are likely to arise include how to ensure coherence and maximise input from each individual within a short period. Who has which impact? What does this imply for the results or output?

We need time to become acquainted with each other, and mutual coordination requires attention. The partners must become attuned to each other and learn each other's strengths and weaknesses. 'Time', however, is what we do not have. Although everyone is familiar with the notion that the time invested at the beginning can be recovered later, it is difficult to act accordingly. Time is scarce, and pressure and impatience are high. Moreover, 'We've got to start somewhere'.

The emergence of problems due to the lack of a calm, well-considered period of introduction and the relative magnitude of such problems depends upon several different factors. Examples include the closeness of the cooperation demanded by the assignment, the extent to which the assignment involves conceiving of solutions or innovations for other parties, and the structuring of our own actions. Teachers who are working together to build a new vision on learning and who are going to use this vision themselves might be bothered more by a lack of time than would a multi-disciplinary team working to develop a technical innovation in which all partners contribute their own expertise as much as possible. This difference is caused by the balance between together and alone. In the case of the team of teachers, one enters as an individual. We bring along our own experience and interpretations. If we are fascinated by education and learning, creating a new vision will also interest us: it allows us to put a part of ourselves into the work. Regardless of how difficult we might find it to merge our own ideas with or exchange them for those contributed by others depends upon our personalities, the strength of our convictions and the ways in which we learn. It becomes more difficult with regard to implementation: the actual application of this new jointly formed vision in our own

practice. How can this be done? If we are part of the collective that designed the innovation (in this case, the vision), why should it be difficult for us to work according to this vision?

In essence, although we might have contributed to the development of the new vision, we have not yet adopted it as our own. We have not yet integrated it into our own frames. We have not yet truly positioned it within our convictions and drivers. We have addressed the issues only 'in theory'. Once we have linked it to our own values and realised it within our own practice, we are confronted with points that might conflict with who we wish to be. Perhaps we must give up something for which we have previously been easily rewarded.

What usually bothers us the most is bringing this vision beyond the circle of its 'founders'. In itself, this is not so unusual, as the process of implementation is also a difficult step. The underlying assumption is that people within the circle will have no trouble embedding the vision within their own practice, and that they can then serve as examples to others.

Learning and development

It should be clear that professional identity is regularly addressed as an issue in our work and in our careers. Let us zoom in on what stands out when we apply the lens of learning and development on the part of a professional. First, professional identity plays a major role in initial degree programmes. It is in these programmes that the foundation is laid for professional practice. How much focused attention do we truly devote to professional identity in these programmes? Do we give sufficient consideration to people who have already mastered a field and are not building professional identity from scratch?

Only a limited amount of all the learning that takes place in organisations concerns the addition or expansion of knowledge. It is increasingly and more frequently involving changes in the way of working or transformations. Professional identity is also increasingly at play. We nevertheless continue to regard learning and development as the addition of knowledge and the development of skills. We rarely include the transformation of previously constructed thoughts (Illeris, 2014; Kegan, 2009). We devote only a limited amount of attention to the connection between the content and the person. In other words, we neglect the questions, 'What does knowledge actually mean to you?' Where does this fit with who you are and how you work as a professional?' (Sockett, 2012).

When attempting to get change off the ground, leaders in organisations nevertheless usually opt for push strategies (new developments, knowledge and insight that is determined and imposed from within the organisation). Although we have self-direction, we allow very little space for it. We actually provide little or no support for this self-direction – which is based in professional identity. All things considered, although we do add, we offer only limited space for reflection, clearing away and redefining what we stand for and which direction we would like to take.

Nevertheless, such professional-identity maintenance could be highly beneficial in issues regarding cooperation. People with strong professional identities can cooperate more easily, because they are more aware of what they stand for, what is crucial and where it might be possible to compromise. Moreover, others know what they can expect and what they have on which to build.

Finally, we see that professional identity does receive attention in leadership tracks: 'Who are you and what do you stand for?' In this context, however, the specific characteristics of professional identity are much less a topic of examination and discussion. These tracks are about leaders, their lives and their interpretations. They are less about letting go of certain professional values and

acquiring new ones. The image emerges that such programmes are more likely to intervene in personal development, tending to remain separate from the profession.

Professional identity is not a static phenomenon. It is a component of ourselves and – like ourselves – it is continually in development. Professional identity thus requires maintenance and attention. We see that, although professional identity should be addressed at a variety of points throughout the course of professional development, we devote relatively little or no attention to it.

Which way are we going now?

In the previous sections, we have discussed points in professional existence at which professional identity plays a role. Looking over these examples, what do they teach us?

Basic

Professional identity plays a major role in our professional existence. Our professional identity forms our signature, and it recognisably and irrevocably typifies who we are in our work. It endows us with our colour. Professional identity connects a collective side (frame) to an individual side (self). Professional identity (and professional frames) is associated with consistency in behaviour, with focus and guidance in making choices, with a clear place in partnerships, and with resilience and excellence.

Developments

The decreasing shelf life of knowledge and the accelerated development of new products and services have made us accustomed to the fact that staff members must regularly develop new knowledge and insights. The pressure is further intensified by the increasing social, emergent and dynamic complexity, combined with continuous change. Companies, networks and organisations – regardless of form – are also making more frequent fundamental shifts (transformations) in their working methods, rather than adding breadth or depth to a particular approach.

Selected solutions

It is clear that these trends have implications for learning and development on the part of people and organisations. All things considered, it goes beyond merely an increase in the amount of ‘learning’; it also involves a shift in the type of learning – from informative to transformative. The solutions that have been selected up to this point for coping with the increasing amount of learning are subject to several limitations and side effects. Allow us to present a few examples.

- The practice of ‘just in time’ learning and learning in shorter units of time is becoming more common. This allows less time for ‘simmering’ or for coming into bloom.
- Learning is being organised closer to the actual work – and preferably within the context of this work. If this work is dominated by guidelines and formats, however, it allows less room for the innovation that is actually needed in the field.
- When rules and certification are added as a means of stimulating quality, they often involve a level of control that is no longer effective for professionals.
- More emphasis is being placed on self-direction, even though trust is lacking. Organisations continue or return to the option of compulsory training. The mixed message that this sends prevents self-direction from becoming natural.

Problem areas

There is clearly a desire and a need for development, both informative (i.e. the addition of information) and transformative (i.e. shift in perspective). Two obstacles emerge in this regard. First, transformative issues are often treated as informative ones, failing to mention any shift in the way of looking at things and instead defining the issue from the perspective of some deficiency. For example, as we have proposed, the shift from expert to consultant might translate into a deficiency in consultancy skills.

The second obstacle is that the almost reflexive reaction to the necessity of learning and development is one of increasing control. There is an increasing urge to devolve into 'musts'. We must bring in more knowledge within a shorter time. We must innovate, but the area in which this innovation is to take place is riddled with restrictions. We must direct ourselves, albeit within a pre-determined context of content and form.

Let us be honest: control is not the best way to encourage professionals to maximise their potential, and it does not form the best foundation for a transformation. Moreover, 'compulsory learning' leads to fatigue. The balance of this approach tends to fall excessively on one side. We demand energy without considering where it should come from. We fill people's minds without helping with tasks of clearing out and arranging. There is space for obligation, but not for freedom.

Risk

In some fields and social developments, transformation is overlooked. An example can be found in the changes taking place in the field of education, in which the step from 'teacher' to 'supervisor' involves more than a simple expansion of knowledge, instead requiring the redefinition of professional identity if it is to succeed. This example also demonstrates the problems that could arise: professional identity becomes buried and disappears into the background, drowned in non-integrated knowledge. People become exhausted, grow tired of change or start to resist learning and development. Perhaps even more seriously, many professionals are no longer aware of their professional standards, thus falling silent when asked about them.

With the knowledge that standards are a condition for reflection (Sockett, 2012), this can be nothing other than a prologue to the downfall of mastery. How can we expect quality if we are unable to build upon individual professional identity?

Solution alternative

Restoring the balance will require attention to the other side of the spectrum: development from the inside out'. The balance is thus between 'obligation' and 'freedom'. Obligation emerges from the interest of the organisation, with quality requirements and a never-ending stream of changes. It also emerges from the profession, from the desire and necessity of delivering transparent, stable quality. Yet another form of obligation is perhaps better captured by the word 'discipline'.

In contrast, freedom occurs in relation to and from within ourselves. It involves the space in which to know ourselves, to clear out from time to time, to work from our own core and from within our own interpretations and qualities. There is also freedom on the part of our colleagues in the field, which can reflect and frame our own development and interpretations; it can inspire and challenge us to work together to sustain the development of the frames

and rules of play within the field. Freedom is also needed in order to work with each other to do what the 'organisation' needs in order to justify its existence.

This does not involve complete freedom, but the connection between our own professional identities, the field and the organisations in which we work. Securing the balance between obligation and freedom is a condition for retaining resilience, preventing fatigue, achieving excellence, applying wisdom and having the capacity for self-direction.

Yield

The discussion above raises the following questions: What are the ultimate benefits of working to build our professional identities? Which benefits can we expect? Let us begin by establishing that building professional identity is not a panacea. Professional identity helps to eliminate deficiencies in knowledge. In itself, it does not bring any innovation or organisational development. We could describe many issues in which discussions of professional identity would be more ridiculous than they would be meaningful, and for which the acquisition of new knowledge would suffice (single-loop learning).

There are also issues that cannot be addressed by adding knowledge, skills and attitudes, but that require us to reconsider our authority and 'being'. Being aware of and working to build professional identity provides fertile ground for professional development and professional action.

Over the years, considerable research has been conducted on the consequences of having a 'strong' professional identity and on the effects of working to build this identity. Amongst other results, these studies have indicated that professionals with strong identities:

- are more resistant to stress (Marcia, 1966);
- set goals that are more realistic and have a greater sense of reality (Marcia, 1966);
- have a greater sense of self-worth and self-confidence (R. F. Baumeister, 2011; Marcia, 1966);
- have careers that are more successful (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Hall, 2002);
- understand others better (Baumeister, 2011);
- possess better self-regulation (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007);
- have a more positive attitude towards their own professions and are better equipped to withstand poorer working conditions (Beijaard, 2004).

In summary, professional identity contributes to autonomy, resilience, wisdom and excellence. Issues that touch upon these topics could benefit from an approach that includes professional identity.

Action perspective

A final question concerns the action perspective: what can we do to provide a place for professional identity in organisations? What is lacking in the current palette or in our current working methods? Although we might be getting ahead of our research (which will be building on this topic in the coming years), we would like to share a few intellectual directions.

This perspective turns primarily on recognising professional identity as an important aspect of professional development in an ever more rapidly changing world. Moreover, the contemporary professional is a learning professional, who makes a conscious choice to be a professional and who consciously copes with the requirements of professional practice. Within this context,

paying attention to our professional identities is an important tool that will allow us to work well within our fields. The way in which we view our own professionalism or that of the collective could stand to be questioned more often.

The fact that professional identity is the 'property' of the professional implies that compulsory developmental programmes are of little use. Nevertheless, they do call for focused attention. Professional identity cannot be simply recognised or identified, particularly not by its owner. The exploration and specification of professional identity requires both focused and collective attention. In addition, professional identity is undergoing a process of development, and it is more in need of maintenance than it is of constant attention.

The turning points in a career constitute a special type of attention to professional identity. These turning points may come from outside, being caused by serious events in another area of life (e.g. illness or personal loss). They may also come in response to personal career choices. Professional identity may be actively applied at these points in order to provide them with form and meaning.

Finally, there are changes in frames or broader shifts in perspective that emerge from developments in the field or in the organisation, with which the professional is forced to 'go along'. In these issues, it is important to find a place for both professional identity and the professional frame within the context of learning and development. The following is an example of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2009; 2000). Whether we should start with the individual and then proceed to the collective or vice versa depends upon the question and the context.

Taken together, there is a solid line of rationales and reasons for providing a clearer place for the professional heart within the context of professional development, professionalisation and organisational development.

Part 3: Invitation

Working together in a Research-Practice Partnership

In the first part of this booklet, I discuss my own way of looking at learning and development in organisations: the ecological perspective. In the second part, I zoom in on the heart of professional development: professional identity. In this third part, I would like to focus on the connection between theory and practice through Research-Practice Partnerships (RPP's). I do this for several reasons. First, the connection between theory and practice is very close to my heart. In addition to being the core business of a professor, the quest to optimise this connection is a part of my own professional identity, and it merits additional attention. Second, I include RPPs in this context because I feel that they could offer a good working method for the further elaboration of issues concerning professional identity. Finally, in itself, the RPP concept is a fine example of the ecological perspective on learning. There is thus sufficient reason to delve further into the concept. To begin, I would like to take you back to my own introduction to 'Research-Practice Partnerships', which took place at the AERA 2014 conference in Philadelphia. At this conference, Madelon de Beus, Rudy Richardson (whom we sadly had to bid farewell shortly thereafter) and I attended a session focusing on this concept. I then explore the concept in further depth, first in theoretical terms and then by applying it to professional identity. I conclude by issuing an invitation to move forward together in this direction.

From my notes

The best way to start an introduction to RPPs might be to share the notes that I made at the AERA conference in response to the session that we attended on this topic. At that time, I wrote: 'With the choice for: *Climbing out of the ivory tower: New forms of Research Practice Partnerships* (AERA session led by Thomas M. Smith of Vanderbilt University), I feel that I was very lucky! In general, the AERA conference is not a place where I come across much about organisational development, at least not in systematic terms. But look: entire models of cooperation and implementation. Principles addressed (understand the system, start small, create informative feedback loops, use problem-centred and user-centred methods) correspond to my frame of reference. One word that keeps recurring is *up-scaling*. It thus regularly involves expansion to other contexts. It contains nice thoughts that could be described concisely as *pull instead of push* strategies. What I am learning is that I could probably bring my two professions closer to each other: consulting on organisational development and conducting research. Work with questions from practice (I find myself thinking, 'Yeah, duh!').

Note: The American Educational Research Association (AERA), founded in 1916, is concerned with improving the educational process by encouraging scholarly inquiry related to education and evaluation and by promoting the dissemination and practical application of research results. The AERA has more than 25,000 members from 85 countries. Each year, 10–12 thousand of these members come together in a conference.

But... the characteristic and unique feature of research obviously resides in the fact that we are searching for new knowledge. By definition, therefore, we distance ourselves from practice, acquire the new knowledge, which we must then 'sell' back. One important question actually concerns the interaction between theory and practice: how can we do this properly?' After this first session, more followed. I sought out every session that seemed to be going in this direction. I have since wrestled and played around with the material concerning RPPs. I shall now list several elements.

Contours of the RPP

Coburn, Penuel, & Geil (2013, p. ii) Define RPPs as 'long-term collaborations, which are organized to investigate problems of practice and generate solutions for improving district outcomes'.

These partnerships are characterised by

1. long-term cooperation;
2. focused on issues relating to practice,
3. which are mutually profitable
4. and for which focused strategies are deployed to promote cooperation
5. and to arrive at original analyses.

In which areas should we look for RPPs? Concepts that are closely associated with RPPs include boundary crossing (o.a. Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), improvement science (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2011), design research, communities of practice and professional learning communities, as well as organisational development and system thinking.

The power of such cooperation resides in the close connection between theory and practice, which leads to more active use of theory while simultaneously encouraging more active contribution. The RPP contributes to 'informed practice'. The research and the researchers are within reach of each other. They can help practitioners in the search for rigour and support, as well as in developing these characteristics into a natural professional attitude. At the same time, new knowledge and more widely supported contributions to theory and practice emerge, in addition to customised solutions.

Challenges are obviously involved as well. For example, it is not particularly easy to connect the world of the researcher with that of the practitioner. Each has its own dynamics, values, standards and interests, in addition to their own different paces. It is important to take this into proper consideration, to get to know each other and to take differences into account. The development and preservation of trust is in need of constant attention, in which continually ensuring mutual interests plays a major role. Finally, working in a network also implies the need for constant attention to the balance between local and overarching interests.

Example of a working method for RPPs

This is all very interesting, but what do RPPs look like? A story told by Lora Cohen-Vogel (University of North Carolina) at the AERA conference inspired me in this regard. The NCSU (National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools) assumes that the distinctions between designing and developing and between initial implementation and up-scaling stand in the way of educational innovation (Redding, Haynes, & Cannata, 2014). Their approach distinguishes four sequential phases: (1) research, (2) innovation, design and development, (3) implementation and (4) scaling up.



Fig. 4. Photo from the NCSU brochure

The research phase involves preparatory research on issues and possible schools of thought existing within a group of schools (the NCSU works with districts). This is followed by the innovation phase, with a ‘design challenge’ that is at the base of a collective process of design and development. In this phase, a broad team is assembled to take on this challenge. In a process of continual improvement, each organisation then works with its own team to experiment, elaborate, refine and adjust various elements to their own specific contexts. An implementation phase emerges gradually through the continual broadening of our experimentation. In the final phase, more schools have joined, testing becomes even broader and leadership is gradually transferred to the individual schools. The nice thing about this upscaling – the expansion of the group of schools involved – is that the entire process, from question to realisation, is approached in an integrated way (from practice to theory and back to practice). The four phases make this manageable.

Inspired by the model developed by the NCSU, I started looking for a way to project Research-Practice Partnerships onto my own research and consultancy practice. In this search, I aimed to retain the clarity of the four-way division without working in phases, as I am of the opinion that it is important to allow these processes to exist alongside each other. The projection that follows could thus best be described in terms of levels than in terms of phases.

Towards our own approach

In my own practice as a consultant, I regularly encounter issues for which some aspects are known, but for which there are no thorough, operational approaches. Issues that have emerged multiple times, but have yet to be resolved to complete satisfaction; issues that continually recur, become more urgent, are highly complex and with which multiple organisations wrestle. Providing a place for professional identity in organisations is one such issue. Self-directing teams are also surrounded by intriguing questions, including the tension between autonomy and collectivity, or the hybrid professionalism of the leadership in this context. Examples include programmes oriented towards organisational development and the tension between systematic and incremental development or between anticipating the limited malleability and the continuous pressure for measurement and certainty. For all of these issues, perspectives have emerged, aspects have been elaborated and components have been made concrete, but the complete puzzle has yet to be assembled.

The intent to combine substantive expertise, practical knowledge, consultancy, research and coaching, forming a coalition with 5–8 organisations at the intersection of theory and practice for an extended period. The RPP will comprise the entire system from the articulation of questions and research through ‘improved practice’, subsequently serving as a basic example of an ecological approach: Do not break the process from research to innovation and implementation into pieces. Allow those involved to interact with each other and utilise each other’s qualities, in a pace and in a manner that is suited to the work. Before I discuss the specific realisation of the RPP for professional identity, allow me to sketch the general outlines.

Ecological perspective

- Do not break the process from research to innovation and implementation into pieces; keep them together, proceeding from the questions that arise in practice; (Holistic principle: Shift from part to whole, thinking from within the question rather than the answer)
 - Do not be led by the programme; work in a system of professionals in which all members can contribute their own qualities, thus improving both individually and jointly
 - (Systemic principle: shift from object to relationship, with attention to what is hidden and what is connected)
 - Do not think everything out ahead of time; work together for a longer time, following the pace, energy and developments in the organisation and those involved (Organic principle: shift from event to patterns, doing justice to natural possibilities and limitations)
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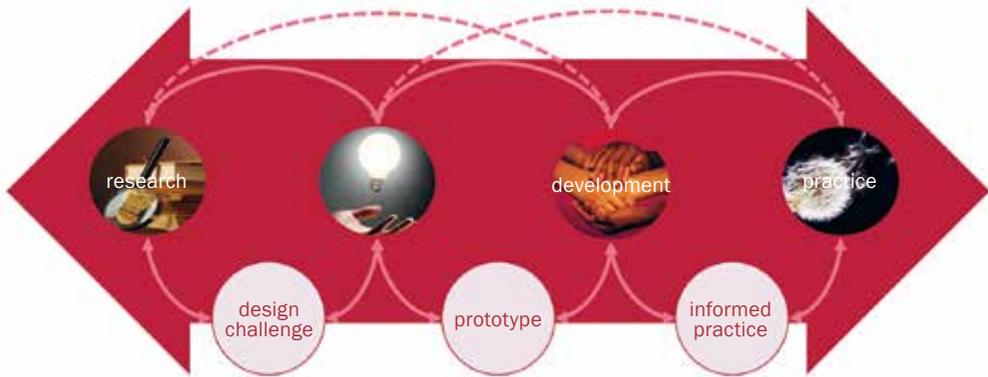


Fig. 5. Outline of the approach

In RPPs, four working levels exist alongside each other: research, design, development and practice. There are no strict divisions between these levels. They overlap each other, as will become clear along the way.

First level: Research

The first level, that of research, transcends the participating organisations. The level is ‘populated’ by a research team consisting of representatives from the various organisations. These representatives are people who feel an affinity with a certain topic, who have above-average curiosity in this regard and who would like to dig deeper in search of new insights and directions for solutions. In the research team, they cooperate with a number of researchers or experts on the topic. The tasks of the research team consist of articulating the common issue, collecting theories, insights and active ingredients (e.g. interventions, rules, schools of thought), initiating and possibly conducting research (or having it conducted) and ensuring the circulation of knowledge. This team does not merely consider; it also experiments and is active in supervising and supporting the second level.

Second level: Design

The second level, that of design, plays out within each organisation, formed by a design team. Each organisation has such a team. These teams provide the following:

- a diagnosis of the issue within the specific context
- the design of a specific working method, suited to this context
- the supervision of interventions within the individual organisation
- the explication of organisation-specific research questions, in addition to conducting research

The design team primarily delivers a working method (prototype) that is applied within the individual organisation, expanding into a full, working solution. During the implementation, research is conducted on what works in this practice, but broader research questions may be included as well. The organisation may conduct this research on its own or in cooperation with the research team.

Third level: Development

The third level, that of development, involves the concrete efforts – the interventions – that emerge from the design that has been produced. This level thus has effects primarily for the participants in the interventions, but also for the supervisors of the interventions.

The design team takes the initiative in this regard. In both the execution and the accompanying research that can figure into this level, it is possible to turn to the research team (for observation and feedback, supervision in the workplace, support in reflective practice).

Fourth level: Practice

The fourth level is that of daily working practice, in which the effects of the interventions that have been carried out become visible. These interventions are aimed at influencing daily working practice. Research questions may emerge from things that happen in this context and for which the organisation is seeking new ideas, perspectives, solution alternatives and answers. Research may also take place at this level.

The first two levels could be regarded as representing theory, with the last two levels representing practice. Many different forms of interaction are located between these levels. Research may be deployed at all levels. Initiatives for research can emerge from theory, as well as from practice. Such initiatives may include review studies, design-focused research or studies of the operation of the interventions or the issue in practice. One characteristic is that the participating organisations, experts and researchers work together. They articulate questions, design research and consider the most intelligent action to take. It is crucial for all those involved to emphasise the importance of the question and to agree on the manner of conducting research. In this way, the Research-Practice Partnership can help to provide deeper insight into the issue at hand and to achieve ‘informed practice’.

In recent years, the research unit of Stoas Vilentum (and initiated and described by Madelon de Beus, Frank de Jong, Rudy Richardson and myself) has worked to develop a unique colour for several principles in the practice-oriented study entitled ‘Ecologically Transdisciplinarily Inspired research’.

The ETI principles consist of two basic principles and six supplementary principles that could also be beneficial in the RPP. The basic principles of ‘connection’ and ‘transdisciplinarity’ form the ‘fundamental tones’ or ‘epistemological basis’ of ETI research. The six supplementary principles are wisdom, self-knowledge, ecological error, collective development, narrativity and nature.

Coalition, co-financing, co-creation

Each organisation thus has its own stream of research and development, although exchange also exists within the network. In this exchange, the organisations utilise each other's resources, including qualities and insights, as well as the plans and interventions that each has developed. The goal is to utilise each other's qualities, in addition to cooperating and effecting the flow of the insights acquired through the organisations involved. For example, one organisation can guide another in an experience that it has previously acquired. They may also act as critical friends to each other in the design of plans and interventions. The RPP thus forms a coalition of organisations that can act more quickly than would be possible for each organisation individually, due to shared financing and co-creation.

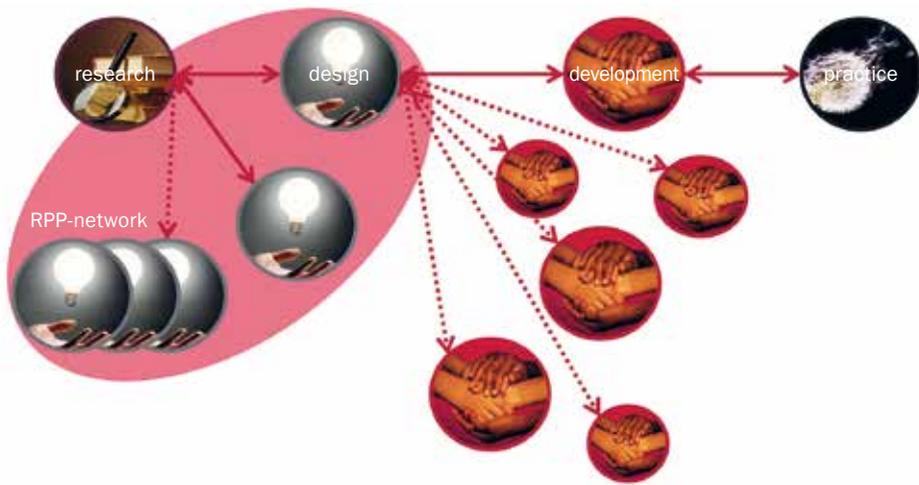


Fig. 6. Interconnection in the process in the organisation and in the network

If we visualise the impact of this way of working, we can see how quickly the oil-slick effect can take shape and thus how broadly data can be collected, knowledge developed and new insights circulated. In the research team consisting of about eight professionals, all of the participating organisations are represented. A design team also includes between six and eight professionals. We assume a network to contain between five and eight design teams. Further dispersion within each organisation will depend upon the manner in which the organisation concerned has structured the third and fourth levels.

Working together in Research-Practice Partnership

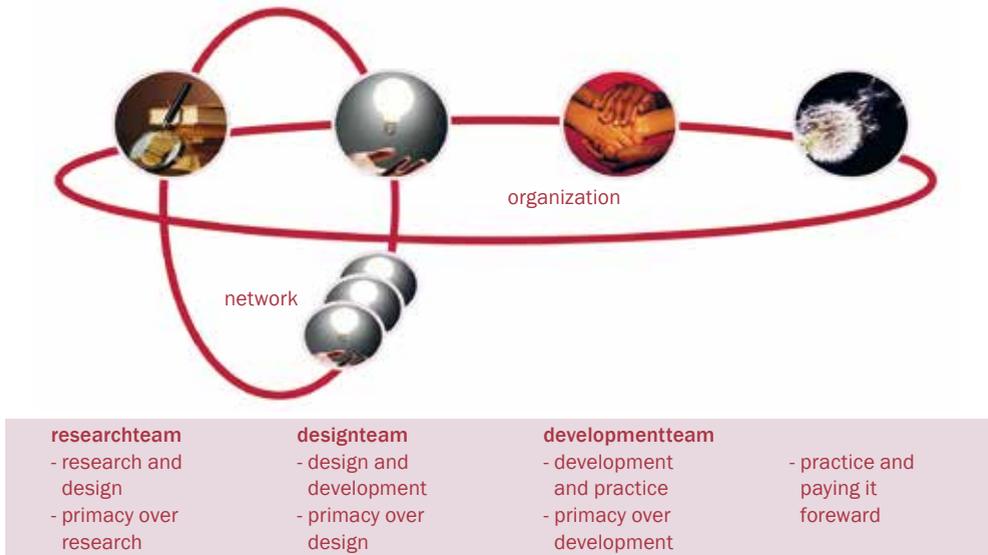


Fig. 7. Snowball effect

We shall leave the general description of RPPs at this point, shifting to the concrete realisation that we have in mind for the further development of professional identity in research and practice.

The following phase in working to build professional identity

Let us first take a step back in history. We began with the preparation for working to build professional identity in mid-2012. In January 2013, we launched the current project, supported by a Box 4 grant from the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation. In the period leading up to the present (March 2015), we have worked with the research group to develop the contours for professional identity.

This research group consists of the following members:

- Elly van de Braak, consultant and coach in the area of identity (including professional identity) at De Sterke Punten and head of our theoretical development with regard to identity
- Heleen Draijer, coach, process supervisor and talent manager at 'Later is allang begonnen' ('Later has already begun'; participation in our team beginning September 2014), with special attention to the role of crises in development
- Cees den Hartog, senior consultant and researcher at Deltion College and in the Professional Identity team, with a focus on professional space
- Femke de Jonge, management consultant at De Galan group (participation until June 2014), with a contribution on ownership
- Gerritjan van Luin, general director/board member of Trinitas College (secondary education), with contributions stemming from Transactional Analysis
- Tom van Oeffelt, instructor and researcher at Stoas Wageningen | Vilentum University of Applied Sciences, with a focus on professional frames and the influence of language; also our project leader

- Mart van de Veewei, instructor at Stoas Wageningen | Vilentum University of Applied Sciences, with a wealth of experience in person-oriented interventions concerning inspiration
- Freerk Wortelboer, management consultant and trainer/coach, independently established and affiliated with the NSO (Netherlands School for Education Management), with special input on wisdom
- Myself, a lector at Stoas Wageningen | Vilentum University of Applied Sciences and an organisational development consultant affiliated with Twynstra Gudde

It could be said that this group has functioned (at least in part) according to the RPP model in recent years. In any case, a base has been laid, and we would now like to design broader Research-Practice Partnerships. Although much has already been accomplished, efforts to build professional identity in organisations have only just begun.

Let us first consider what has been achieved in recent years and what we will take as a base for the next steps:

- First and foremost will be a *theoretical exploration* of the underlying concepts: professional, identity, and professional identity. The literature that has been used provides a good starting point for partners who will join us, helping them to find their way in this complex topic in the early stages of their participation.
- In addition, research has been conducted on images that professionals have of professional identity. We have confronted theory with practice, ultimately producing a *theoretical framework* for working with professional identity in organisations. These developments have been described in *Je binnenste buiten* (Bringing your inside out; Ruijters, 2015), and they will form the first steps for the design teams as they begin to work with professional identity and professional frames.
- In the interest of project completion, a *website* has been created (www.professioneleidentiteit.nl). In addition to providing information aimed at raising awareness concerning the topic and increasing the visibility of partnerships, this website contains a closed component dedicated to knowledge exchange amongst RPP partners.
- Quite early in the process, we started working with an *app* 'Mijn binnenste buiten', with which people can take the first steps towards exploring their professional identities. We shall spare you the instructive complications and frustrations of such processes of design and development. The ultimate result is an important tool that partners in the RPP can use to help professionals in their organisations to get started. We also translated a set of interview questions that can support the exploration into a series of *photo cards* ('Ons binnenste buiten' [Bringing our inside out]) to be used in encounters.
- In the final year, the time and energy of the research group were focused on intervention. We have made a start in this regard, and these *described interventions* are available within the network as well.
- Finally, we have designed a sample intervention system (e.g. combination of approach, series of interventions, contacts/supervisors and structure) entitled 'TopClass', which will help organisations wishing to realise professional identity get started, in addition to providing them with images and schools of thought. We share this with you in the following section.

This foundation will allow us to help organisations joining us make a start in addressing their own issues, while cooperating with each other to gain momentum in this material. After providing an introduction to TopClass, we describe the cooperation as we envision it.

An example: TopClass as a system of intervention

Before discussing further details of the RPP on professional identity, I would like to take a detour and start at the end: what the RPP on professional identity can ultimately yield. To this end, I outline an example of how efforts to build professional identity could take shape within an organisation. It is an example of an intervention system. I think that this example helps to provide a sense of what needs to be done and which results such efforts could yield.

There are many different reasons why an organisation might wish to pay attention to professional identity (an impression of these reasons is provided in Part 2). The actual reasons will be different for each organisation. In some cases, the cause is rooted in a re-organisation or merger, while in other cases, the reasons have to do with economic pressure and survival. Such may also emerge from the importance that is attached to self-reliant professionals. Moreover, each organisation has its own organisational structure, idiosyncrasies and organisational identities. Something that works in one place will not necessarily work in another place. We therefore consider it important for each organisation to find its own form for paying attention to professional identity. At the same time, many questions remain to be answered with regard to working with professional identity in an organisation.

At this point, we introduce TopClass as a 'sample intervention system'. We have designed this example to serve as a source of inspiration, to create images and to lower the threshold to starting to work with what is admittedly a somewhat abstract and complex topic.

On the form

TopClass is targeted towards professionals in your organisation who would like to be truly good in their fields and who are searching for space and methods to examine and shape or maintain their own professionalism. Questions that it addresses could include the following: Who am I in my field? What give me my colour? Why do I do what I do? What would I definitely not want to lose?

Paying attention to professional identity can strengthen the following:

- Self-direction: the ability to choose one's own course, taking into account the organisation, field and personal perspective
- Resilience: the ability to cope with change and development without losing sight of oneself
- Wisdom: the peace and order to yield benefits from a clear distinction between one's own colour and that of someone else
- Excellence: passion and eagerness to learn that allows one to achieve full potential, both personally and in the practice of one's profession

What is TopClass?

TopClass is a place in which professionals can explore and maintain their own professional identities, partly on their own, but primarily in dialogue with valued colleagues (of their own choosing). TopClass is less focused on behavioural change (although this is highly likely to be a result). It involves helping people to understand and communicate their own manifestos (who they are and what they stand for as professionals) and to re-discover or reinforce their positions. The congruence between thinking and acting plays a central role. In essence, it turns on the objectification of professional identity: not being submitted to it, but being in control.

How can TopClass be found?

Professionals wishing to make an active effort to shape their own professionalism will 'discover' TopClass in the corridors (newsletters, posters, intranet), talk about it at some point with a professional friend and register with the core team. After a brief introduction and exploration of the working method, these professional will go in search of a group of six colleagues with whom they would like to take on this challenge. All aspects of professional identity will be addressed in an alternating process of individual work and around six gatherings, resulting in a personal manifesto.

Not a learning track, but a network

Upon completion, a professional may remain as a part of a small Professional Identity network, or perhaps return for maintenance after six months. Above all else, TopClass is a personal initiative. Individual professionals determine what would be most helpful to them: how long, how deep, how much practice or theory.

On the supervision

Working to build professional identity cannot be imposed. It is the responsibility of the individual professional. It is possible to support professionals in their efforts to build their professional identities. TopClass is one form of such support. It is a place for professionals aspiring to excel. TopClass is an intervention system: a combination of an approach, a series of interventions, contacts/supervisors and structure. It is not a set programme.

TopClass is carried by a small individual team of designers and supervisors from within the professional's own organisation. They understand the topic, have experience in such areas as coaching and possess a broad repertoire of interventions that can be used to guide small groups of professionals in exploring and explicating their professional identities. For their own development and support, these supervisors can turn to us, as the initiators, as well as on the national network that we hope will eventually emerge.

The following principles play a role:

- We begin with the professional's need to become resilient (or more resilient), to become wise (or wiser) and to excel. We thus proceed from professionals' commitment to their own development.
- TopClass proceeds from the individual's own ambition and way of learning, working toward a concrete end – a blog, a manifesto, a more focused LinkedIn profile. Throughout the entire process, the professional is in control and determines the contours of the process.

- Professional identity is both individual and social in character at the same time (non-dualistic).
 - Even in an individual track, ‘professional friends’ play a crucial role. This makes it both an individual and a collective adventure.
 - The activation of the personal professional standard plays a central role, but it is never an end in itself. An individual is a professional within a professional context
 - Working to build professional identity requires time for peace and reflection. Participants do this in their own personal ways. TopClass therefore also offers an app that allows participants to work independently of time and place, in addition to the meetings.
- The development of professional identity never ends. It is important to maintain or, in the context of career questions, to resume. TopClass is therefore as much a network as it is a series of interventions.
- TopClass aims to make these principles tangible and concrete.

And briefly: What is Top Class not?

- TopClass is not therapy or mediation. Questions from professionals are treated with care, and referrals are made in case of more deeply rooted problems (personal or conflictual).
- TopClass is not focused on teams, as this might compromise the principle of voluntary participation. Appropriate solutions can be created for teams deciding on their own to participate as a team.
- We do not see TopClass as a career tool. It can be helpful in achieving a good career question or anchoring within one’s profession.
- TopClass is also not a part of either the organisation or the HRM department. The organisation is nevertheless a sponsor, as it regards TopClass as important and recognises that TopClass offers benefits and does not repeat HRM interventions. Although we are usually highly supportive of the connection with HRM Tools, we must issue a caution in this context. The connection can emerge only at the initiative of the individual professional, this also to avoid jeopardising personal initiative and personal position.

Cooperation in research and practice

We could elaborate TopClass further into a ready-made working method, which we could then offer to organisations. Although we do attach great importance to sharing knowledge and experiences, ‘roll out’ has never been one of our favourite terms. It is highly unlikely that it would actually be the best intervention in any specific organisation.

Conversely, the emergence the ‘not-invented-here’ syndrome, a mismatch with the new context or pressuring (or repressing) side effects would be quite likely, particularly on the part of the intended target group. Moreover, experience has shown that, even if the issue has been acknowledged and even if there is faith in the intervention, closer examination reveals that each organisation tends to apply its own slant. We would like to address this consciously and even insist upon it.

In addition, working with professional identity in organisations is still in the very early phases. Although we have accumulated a great deal of knowledge and insights in recent years, many questions remain to be answered. These questions concern the influence of professional identity in organisations (e.g. ageing, capacity for innovation, ownership).

Other questions concern specific topics. Examples include well-known topics (e.g. professional space), as well as lesser known profession-specific topics (e.g. the development of ‘magistrate-ness’, ‘independence’ or ‘multi-partisanship’) or influential hidden topics (e.g. empathy). Yet other questions concern active ingredients or powerful interventions and design rules.

This calls for placing research and practice in extension to each other, such that both the qualities of both can be utilised. It thus calls for RPPs. We would also like to share our insights (e.g. those documented in the app, interventions and TopClass) and to encourage people to find their own way in this material. Nevertheless, we would like to conduct research together. In this way, each practice can create its own working method based on previously developed insights, while allowing the emergence of joint insights in close proximity to practice.

Outline of the working method

What would this RPP on professional identity look like? It involves long-term cooperation on the part of a group of organisations that would like to develop their own practices on this topic, in addition to conducting joint research. As it currently exists, the research team will continue to be an important source of assistance in research and practice in the new partnership. New key figures from the RPP could find a home base within this group.

When introducing this topic in the organisation and launching the RPP, attention should be paid primarily to exploratory conversations concerning the relevance and manifestations of the topic within the specific organisation (where is it needed, what are possible sources of friction, where would support be helpful), as well as to the introduction of the topic to stakeholders.

Thereafter, attention should shift towards the composition of the design team. As with actually working with professional identity, the commitment and autonomous choice of team members is of crucial importance. The duties of the design team include the following:

- making a diagnosis of the manner in which professional identity plays a role in the specific context, the attention it is already receiving, the pressure that is exerted upon it and the possibilities that exist for shaping professional identity;
- designing a specific working method that is suited to the context;
- initiating and supervising interventions in the specific organisation;
- articulating research questions and designing research.

The design teams form a crucial link within the RPP. It is thus also important for the team to have a thorough introduction to the thought surrounding professional identity and to pay sufficient attention to its own professional identity and how to work with it.

Even at the start of the design team, research can play an important role. For example, if an organisation has a policy of ‘placing ownership low in the organisation’, the relationship of this policy to professional identity could be a topic of research. Another example could involve the vitality of a specific group of professionals. It is also possible to search for and work with research questions that are of broad interest within the RPP (e.g. issues concerning young or highly experienced professionals, or issues associated with hybrid professionals). In addition to being a way of acquiring knowledge on a relevant topic, research is a good way to learn together and to reinforce mutual cooperation. Exploring possible research questions, finding a common issue and underlying ambition, and outlining a possible study are thus collective activities.

In a later phase, the research roles could be divided, with someone (preferably a two-person partnership or an individual with back-up) responsible for the further elaboration of the research. Having acquired sufficient knowledge of and affinity for the topic, and possessing sufficient clarity concerning the common research questions, the design team (with guidance from the PI research team) will explore the context, history and prevailing issues in the organisation, arriving at its own diagnosis and its own refinement of the goals.

The teams will design their own structures through experimentation. Many organisations already know of interventions that touch upon professional identity. The task will be to discuss, elaborate and adjust each intervention such that it can function as an intervention for professional identity (i.e. making it suitable for PI). In this process, it is possible to draw upon insights and examples (e.g. from separate interventions or from TopClass or other programmes) from other organisations in the network, as well as on materials (e.g. the app or the card game), expertise and experience.

The DRIE working method, which was designed for organisational development (Ruijters & Veldkamp, 2012), could provide a good base on for helping the design team to arrive at a suitable design for the organisation in question.

Once the design is complete (with its own set of interventions and its own working method), it is important to set it in motion. As soon as the first candidates have registered and the system has started to operate, a different type of questions will arise than was the case during the design phase. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. During the start-up period, it is particularly important to organise intensive support (e.g. email, telephone back-up, individual guidance and coaching, regular sessions with the design team) in order to discuss progress and to engage in joint learning regarding the topic, the approach and learning within the organisation.

Research plays a role in this process as well: which interventions work, and why? How can unexpected developments be explained?

Up to this point, we have primarily addressed the activities and developments within an organisation. The RPP constitutes a backbone in this regard. The organisation can turn to the research team, as well as to other members of the network. The network supports the professional development of the people involved in the design teams (an aspect that is often forgotten), encourages the exchange of learning experiences and research results, and stimulates the use of informed practice and evidence-based working methods with regard to the topic.

Once the intervention system is operating well, the organisation may remain in the network, if desired, although we will look for new ways of being of benefit to each other. We would be happy to see a 'pay-it-forward' effect emerge in this regard. For example, the organisation in question could share its own experiences with a new starter.

Concrete expression of the principles underlying the partnership

The cooperation within the RPP and between the research team and the design team takes its shape in practice, in mutual consultation and according to need and insight. We do this based on several underlying principles.

Long-term collaboration

The realisation of a place, staffing, care and an appropriate intervention system relating to professional identity within an organisation is not something that can be arranged in a single afternoon. Once the decision has been made, all those involved would benefit from having time and space for it. We assume a period of at least two years before the intervention system is in place, enjoys some level of recognition and has worked through its initial start-up problems. Our agreements concerning cooperation thus also cover a period of two years. Nevertheless, there is no pre-specified route for learning to work with professional identity in a specific organisation. We therefore assume regular points for reflection and re-contracting (each trimester). In the beginning, therefore, the attention within the partnership will focus more on preparation, on the composition of a suitable team and on exploratory discussions. The team will then start to work, becoming familiar with the topic and underlying theory, and it might need help in designing the intervention system. Attention will then shift to communication and start-up within the organisation, as well as to the elaboration of research questions. This will gradually shift to the supervision of supervisors and the supervision of research. The needs of the design team will change throughout the various phases.

Internal sustainable development team

We assume that every organisation could benefit from having its own intervention system. Although we do have a model, each organisation has its own characteristics and patterns, as do the professionals who work there. We will be happy to help organisations in the process of building their own systems, although ownership should ultimately rest within the organisation itself. For this reason, we will operate with a development team consisting of professionals (6–8 people) from the organisation who have an affinity for the topic, as well as the ambition, possibility (available time and energy) and willingness to work together to achieve good results.

Sustainable construction and launching requires an anchor in the organisation and continuity of interest. Anchoring will be different in each organisation, and it should be a constant topic of discussion. Continuity is reinforced by expecting any professional participating in the team to arrange a replacement upon leaving (in consultation with the existing team). Other agreements or interventions that could enhance sustainability are to be determined by the development team.

A powerful and credible manner of working with professional identity also demands that we take our own professionalism seriously. Individual experience plays a central role during the process of design and, after the design, the supervisors continue with the active examination of their own work and their own professional identities. To this end, annual sessions will be organised across all organisations (six half-day sessions, with each participant expected to attend at least three).

Continue conducting research together

As noted before, professional identity is not a finished design that ‘can be implemented’. We are continuously engaged in joint learning through research, as well as through working in our own organisations. Although a considerable amount of research has already been conducted, the manner in which we are able to work with professional identity in practice is still in the very early stages. Joint learning, designed according to our own needs and focus, is therefore a permanent part of the cooperation. We also attach importance to exchange across organisations. We do this by organising gatherings and encouraging the exchange of materials through a closed component of our website. Other means include encouraging organisations to act as critical friend to each other, by coupling participants with Master’s or PhD programmes, and by working together to arrange topic-specific working sessions.

Summary of the RPP

- Working in the RPP turns on co-creation, coalition and co-financing. Working in this RPP on the shaping of professional identity within the participants’ own organisations calls for an investment of energy, time and financing for two years, during which all partners have the opportunity to re-synchronise and re-address the form and direction of the partnership each trimester, with an eye towards the plans and developments for the coming period.
- We will contribute the expertise available in the research team, in response to the question that is at play at the time. Guidance can consist of such activities as embedding the topic within the organisation (e.g. through exploratory discussions and brief introductions), mutual discussions concerning the composition of the design team, supervising the design team (e.g. professional development, professionalisation in terms of the topic, consulting on the design) and supervising research.
- You will receive access to the materials that we have developed in recent years, free use of an app that allows professionals to explore professional identity, a card game, a book and described interventions.
- Interventions developed within the RPP will be elaborated according to a format and made available to other partners. We will maintain a website in which we exchange information amongst all organisations involved.
- Research is a constant component of working in any RPP. It can involve topics that transcend organisations, as well as topics that are specific to particular organisations. The results of such research will be shared within the RPP, in addition to being published jointly.
- Support for individual development provided by professionals from the development team will be a component of our cooperation. We attach considerable importance to encounters in which the combination of supervising professional identity and shaping one’s own professional identity are topics of discussion.

The gap between theory and practice

The gap between theory and practice has been the subject of considerable discussion. As professionals, we are standing in the middle of this debate. As professionals, we have the duty to forge connections and to utilise the large amount of knowledge that is already available, thus honouring and doing justice to the founders. We should also continuously consider which answers we do not have, what we do not yet sufficiently understand, which explanations we can overturn and which alternatives exist. Let us recall the words of Popper:

‘Whenever a theory appears to you as the only possible one, take this as a sign that you have neither understood the theory nor the problem which it was intended to solve’.

I think that Research-Practice Partnerships can help us to bridge the gap between theory and practice and to take steps together with regard to issues of practice that are close to our hearts, while working to improve our own practice and generate insights that could be beneficial to other practices.

I would be happy to engage in dialogue with you in order to advance the construction of Research-Practice Partnerships on working with professional identity and other issues that concern the learning and development of individuals and organisations. Most of all, however, I would like for us to work together to learn how to reduce the gap between theory and practice, to strengthen informed practice and to transfer our love of research.

To end with Socrates: Wisdom begins with wonder.

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About Stoas

Stoas Wageningen is a faculty of Vilentum University of Applied Sciences and part of the Aeres Groep. Stoas educates educators and knowledge managers on bachelor level in the land-based, life sciences and consumer technologies, and delivers Master's graduates who specialise in learning and innovation. Stoas aims to become a knowledge centre for sustainable connected learning and development for professional education and business communities. Professors and researchers carry out practical research and participate in projects in the field of learning and development for educators, innovators and knowledge managers.

Ecological intelligence is our underlying philosophy. All of our activities focus on the connection between people and their environment, with special attention paid to the relationship between people and nature and the relationship among people. Our new circular building in Wageningen reflects this philosophy.

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